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ABSTRACT

The hard-cover basal textbook continues to dominate teaching and learning in elementary social studies, particularly as a reaction to reduced budgets, the back to basics movement, state-wide testing, and criticism of less traditional teaching practices. Two problem areas encountered by children when using social studies textbooks include lack of experiential background and the inherent difficulty of social studies content. Technical concepts may have little or no meaning unless specific vocabulary or concept development lessons precede use of the text by students. In order to improve this situation, teachers should clarify their objectives and consider the teaching suggestions provided in the textbook. Teachers should also: (1) develop the required background, (2) accommodate varying reading levels, (3) provide direct instructional help, and (4) select learning activities to help students apply and extend the major concepts. The digest contains practical suggestions for developing each of these areas and for helping students extend the textbook concepts and apply them to their own life experiences; the suggestions include using textbook maps, wall maps, and globes; explaining the concept of time; devising a social studies glossary; and explaining why a textbook is used and what should be gained from it. (CBC)

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IMPROVING THE USE OF ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOKS

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Improving The Use of Elementary Social Studies Textbooks

by John D. Hoge

Basal textbooks are a common means of instruction in elementary social studies classrooms. They are useful sources of knowledge and may serve as a core for social studies instruction. However, even the best textbook is a limited teaching tool which must be used in combination with other media and materials to adequately address important learning objectives pertaining to cognitive skills and civic participation. By depending only on textbooks, teachers are likely to deprive students of important learning experiences.

This ERIC Digest discusses (1) how social studies textbooks are used by elementary teachers, (2) problems children have in reading textbooks, and (3) procedures for improving textbook use in elementary social studies.

How are social studies textbooks used by most elementary teachers?

The hard-cover basal textbook dominates teaching and learning in elementary social studies classes (Patrick and Hawke 1982). Too often, social studies instruction involves reading assignments in a single textbook. As with math, science, and health, there is a temptation to allow the textbook to define the curriculum, with the flow of topics determined by consecutive pages.

Many teachers have found ways to expand upon the content of the textbook, adding films, tradebooks, and a variety of projects to help break the monotony of daily use and maintain student interest. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in "textbook-alone" instruction as reductions in school budgets have depleted the supply of up-to-date supplementary materials, and as teachers have begun to react to pressures of the back to basics movement, state-wide testing, and criticisms of all but the most traditional teaching practices.

Much has been written about difficulties young students have in reading social studies textbooks (Metcalf 1980; Rowell 1978; Anderson and Armbruster 1984). The following section summarizes some of these problems.

What problems do children have in reading social studies textbooks?

Two problems young children have in reading elementary social studies textbooks stem from lack of experiential background and complex social studies content. Most teachers are aware of these problems, but may not know how to overcome them.

Concerning adequate experiential background, students who have traveled or lived in many different places are often the classmembers most genuinely interested in social studies. Students who have never left their neighborhood or local community may see little point in learning about distant places. Similarly, students without a sense of personal or family history may find it difficult to relate to the historical settings represented in their textbook.

The second problem, the inherent difficulty of social studies content, stems mainly from the heavy technical concept load of social studies textbook passages. Technical concepts are one or two word "ideas" which have specialized meaning in social studies (for example: government, delta, immigrants, interdependence, economy, constitution, federal, cotton belt, division of labor, and political party). These words may have little or no meaning for students unless specific vocabulary or concept development lessons precede their first encounter with such terms. Yet basal social studies textbooks are notorious for heavy technical concept load and their "thin" discussion of topics, making even the most careful independent reading low in potential benefit.

Hard-to-pronounce names of cities, far-away countries, and foreign-language names contribute to the complexity of textbook content. Many adult readers are stopped by these words, yet social studies is neither complete nor accurate without them.

Add to the above problems frequent references to long periods of time or huge distances, and it becomes even more apparent why children have trouble learning from their social studies textbook. What must a child of nine or ten think when the book says: "Our country was founded over two hundred years ago,"—or perhaps worse—"long, long ago?" What do expressions such as "far to the north," or "over a thousand miles to the east" mean to students who are not sure which direction is which and have never traveled further than across the state or out of town?

What can be done about these problems?

Effective teaching and learning depend upon clarity of objectives. Thus, the first step in helping students overcome textbook reading problems is for teachers to determine what they want students to learn from a certain paragraph, page, or section of the textbook. A helpful procedure is for the teacher to review the children's edition of the textbook before reading the teacher's guide. This helps a teacher to "see the book as the the child sees it," and puts the teacher, not the guide, in charge of what will be learned from the lesson. Try this procedure now. Pick up a copy of the students' book and ask yourself the following questions. What should be learned from reading this page? What is most important here? What facts are presented? What concepts are featured? How are they handled?

Now match your findings with the information presented in the teacher's guide. Consider the teaching suggestions provided. Are they helpful to students? Are they sufficient to ensure the major learnings you want children to get from this page or section? Does the suggested approach clearly address the reading problems students are likely to have with these textbook passages?

Once it is clear what facts should be remembered and which concepts and main ideas form the central focus of the textbook passages, you are ready to decide on an effective textbook teaching plan.

To proceed, you must (1) develop, albeit vicariously, the required background of experience; (2) accommodate the varying reading skills of your students; (3) provide direct instructional help with locating places, comprehending long periods of time, understanding technical concepts, and pronouncing foreign-language names; and (4) select appropriate learning activities which

go beyond the first three measures (which support reading the text) to help students apply or extend the important content of the lesson.

Build experiential background by the first-hand and near first-hand information derived from field trips, films, film strips, and video programs. Guest speakers who can bring in photographs, slide shows, cultural artifacts, or native foods may also help children gain the background needed in order to read with understanding. Discussing study prints, displaying travel brochures, and setting up a reading and reference table are other ways to develop the curiosity and familiarity needed to begin reading with a sense of purpose.

Accommodate varying skill levels of students much as you would during reading period. Split the class into reading groups; prepare study guides to help students identify important facts, concepts, and main ideas; create a reading table where slower readers may use headphones and read along as they listen to prerecorded textbook passages read by you, an aide or a capable older student; ask more able students to translate the content of the text into their own words and share these passages with classmates; or allow students to read with more capable "buddies."

Use textbook maps, wall maps, and globes to locate places emphasized in reading assignments. Note the relative location of a place ("Where is it in relation to ...? How far is it from...? How long would it take to get there from here?"). Ask additional questions about latitude, longitude, elevation, and climate of the place. These should then be related to the local setting so that the students have a concrete referent for comparison.

Explanations of time are also important to student understanding of textbook content. Depict the number of generations required to span the years back to the period you are studying and show this graphically with cut-out paper figures. Construct time lines to show graphically the chronological relationship of events. Students may realize how long ago something was by gaining information about the conditions of life that existed "back then," or by placing major inventions and achievements on a time line extending back to the event.

Form a poster-size classroom social studies glossary to deal with difficult technical concepts and key foreign names. Have academically able students conduct independent investigations of main ideas and important concepts, and present reports to the class to enrich understanding prior to textbook reading. Look up key terms in "adult" dictionaries or encyclopedias, and discuss the definitions. Use established concept learning strategies to directly teach new concepts.

Finally, tell students why they are reading the textbook and what they should gain from it. Specify facts they should locate, record, or remember. Stress main ideas and key words, making sure that the students locate important passages and are able to interpret, in their own words, what the textbook says. Have students write and discuss their interpretations of main ideas and support their conclusions with additional references (Crowe and Youga 1986).

Effective teachers challenge students to apply or extend main ideas, concepts, and skills they have gained from textbook lessons. By doing so, students see how their reading relates to life outside the textbook. Students who read about early American pioneers might investigate modern-day pioneers in Alaska, or the Australian outback. A reading on city government might be followed by an investigation of local government agencies to see if they match ideas in the text. If students are encouraged to use and extend the concepts, facts, and main ideas in textbooks, they will find social studies more interesting and meaningful.

Grahm (1986) and others conclude that the modern basal social studies textbook has much to offer as an instructional resource if the teacher uses it wisely. Teachers are in control of how they use the textbook. Having students read the textbook, day after day, with little pre-reading preparation and no meaningful follow-up is inadequate teaching practice. Good reading instruction and solid social studies practice go hand-in-hand.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304.

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